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ABSTRACT

Grandparents play a vital role in the lives of their grandchildren. A midwest sample of 100 matched pairs of grandfathers and grandmothers and 70 individual grandmothers provided information specific to each of their 770 middle generation children and 1,254 grandchildren. The results revealed no significant correlation between emotional closeness and the geographical distance of grandparents and children/grandchildren, but there was a significant correlation between emotional closeness and frequency of contact. There were no significant correlations between satisfaction and geographical distance or between satisfaction and frequency of contact. Open-ended questions revealed many strengths of the intergenerational bonds. Grandparents extolled the joys of grandparenting in great detail. When asked about the negative aspects of grandparenting, the most frequent answer was that there was nothing bad about it; however, the next most frequent answer related to growing old. Grandparents' most frequent advice was to love the grandchildren and express that love to them. The six characteristics of strong families as previously researched by Dr. Nick Stinnett (1979) can be used as a framework to discuss ways that grandparents can strengthen their family life. (Author/NB)

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The Role of Grandparenting in Building Family Strengths

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ABSTRACT

A Midwest study of 100 pairs of grandparents and 70 grandmothers described the highly positive view the grandparents held of their families. Grandparents extolled the joys of grandparenting in great detail. When asked about the negative aspects of grandparenting, the most frequent answer was that there was nothing bad about it; however, the next most frequent answer had to do with their growing old. Grandparents most frequent advice was to love the grandchildren and tell them you love them.

How grandparents can strengthen their family life is discussed in the orientation of the six characteristics of strong families as was previously researched by Dr. Nick Stinnett.

A grandma is to patch and mend,
To gather up the raveled ends,
To sew together tattered seams
And iron out our wrinkled dreams.

The Role of Grandparenting in Building Family Strengths

Whether they are called Mama and Papa, Granny and Gramps, or Grandma and Grandpa, grandparents play a vital role in the lives of their grandchildren. This role goes beyond the nostalgia of cookie jars and rock-a-bye songs and leads to the development of healthy self-concepts and identity for the children, not to mention the rewards that the grandparents receive. We will examine some of these benefits.

Grandparenting Roles

Classical literature has long emphasized the importance of grandparents to grandchildren as in Heidi (Spyri, 1958) and Little Red Riding Hood, (Perrault, 1949). In recent years, the proliferation of nostalgic sentiments in the form of greeting cards, gift books and special grandparent gift items indicates general public interest in grandparents. Most people enjoy the nostalgia and memories of their grandparents, but that may be the extent of their concern.

Most empirical research on grandparental behavior focuses on the nature and meaning of roles. Social scientists have frequently argued that society has not defined the roles for grandparents. Grandparenthood doesn't appear to be a high-impact life event. Guidelines are few and vague but most grandparents develop their own comfortable style of relationships. However, Baronowski (1982) confirmed the importance of the grandparent/grandchild attachment in research with adolescents. Barranti (1985, p. 350) concluded that "with that attachment comes the experience of being loved, accepted, a sense of security and warmth, a historical sense of self, and the gift of a role model for one's future aging." Kivnick (1982a, p. 60) reported that "grandparenthood does have a real connection to the lives, morale, and mental health of grandparents."

The importance of grandchildren to grandparents was suggested by Erikson (1950) by including "generativity" as one of the later developmental stages of the life cycle. Erikson stated that generativity means that the person is concerned with future generations and with making the world a better place for them to live and to work. When an individual had not successfully completed this stage, Erikson believed that "stagnation and self-absorption" occurred. A prime example of self-absorption is the fictional case of Scrooge in Dickens's A Christmas Carol.

Grandparenting in the Extended Family Network

Social scientists have been telling us that multigenerational households are a situation of the past, but there is evidence that the extended family network persists. Gingles (1979) wrote about the strengths of the extended family:

> With the arrival of grandchildren, the family may grow closer, sharing common joys and increasing the strength of the generation-to-generation family ties. Though many families do not live under a common roof, we again hear more about the "extended" family which lends support to parents of young children. And we are learning more about the importance of the grandparent/grandchild relationship, something which young children and grandparents have known for a long time (p. 425).

Lee (1980) has concluded that there is evidence of strong kin networks especially among the poor (to pool resources) and among the wealthy (to consolidate reources).

Sprey and Matthews (1982) stated that:

> Nuclear families are becoming smaller, but at the same time, members of more generations are alive at one time and share a greater part of each other's life spans. It is this potential for direct, voluntary interaction between young adult grandchildren and their grandparents that seems an important added interpersonal resource, not just to the individuals involved, but also to the family and present-day society (p. 102).

The Importance of Grandchildren to Grandparents

When writing in Blackberry Winter (1972, p. 275) of the birth of her own granddaughter, Margaret Mead realized "that through no act of my own, I had become biologically related to a new human being." She further asserted that individuals who do not experience intergenerational relationships will find a lack of cultural and historical sense of self.

Researchers Wood and Robertson (Kivnick, 1982a) concluded that there was little effect of their activities with grandchildren upon the general morale of older persons. However, Kivnick (1982) emphasizes that general family involvement is important for elderly persons and grandparenthood is a major relationship through which they are involved with their families.

A study by Hartshorne (1979) on the grandparent and grandchild relationship suggested that the development of a close relationship between grandparents and grandchildren could influence the life satisfaction of both. They found that being an "involved" grandmother was associated with greater life satisfaction.

Kornhaber and Woodward's (1981) interviews with 300 grandparents conducted in the late 1970s revealed that grandparenting is a natural instinct manifested by thoughts, feelings, and action and is affected by the culture. "Before the child is born, a future grandparent mentally rehearses future grandparenting" (Kornhaber, 1986, p. 86). The way individuals experience grandparenthood is based upon their experiences as grandchildren, their parents' actions as grandparents, the attitudes of their society toward grandparenthood, and their own altruistic orientation. Kornhaber and Woodward (1981) referred to the development of the relationship through shared time and intimate contact as the "vital connection." Further, the researchers contended that "a child need never--and usually does not--abandon the feelings of dependency and trust generated by loving grandparents" (p.64).

The Nebraska Study

The Midwest sample (Orr, 1986) included 100 matched pairs of grandfathers and grandmothers and 70 individual grandmothers who provided information specific to each of their 770 middle generation children and 1,254 grandchildren. More than half had incomes of more than $20,000. Fifteen percent of the grandmothers were professional and 41% of the grandfathers were farmers while 35% of the grandfathers were retired.

More than 66% lived within three hours of their grandchildren. Nearly 45% had contact with some of their grandchildren at least once a week, and more than 80% had monthly contact. More than 50% of the grandparents perceived they held a close relationship with their grandchildren, and 36% reported a very close relationship. Utilizing the t-test, there was no difference in the emotional closeness between grandfathers and grandmothers toward their grandchildren. More than 44% of the grandparents were satisfied with their relationships with their grandchildren and 33% were very satisfied.

Utilizing the analysis of variance we found there was no significant difference in the emotional closeness and the geographical distance of the pairs, but there was significant difference in the emotional closeness and frequency of contact. There was no significant difference between satisfaction and geographical distance or between satisfaction and frequency of contact.

What Grandparents Like Most About Grandparenting

Open-ended questions included in the survey revealed many strengths of the intergenerational bonds. When asked what they liked most about grandparenting, (See Table 1) many grandmothers waxed poetic in their responses. They liked "the excitement in their voices when they come to visit." They liked the expressions in their eyes, watching them eat ice cream, the sound of their laughter, and their big smiles when they say "Hi, Grandma." A 73-year-old grandfather wrote, "I like the commotion

and excitement of having them in our home and hearing about their lives as they are living them."

The next most frequent type of response of both grandfathers and grandmothers had to do with feelings of being loved. "They make me feel as though I'm the greatest person in the world when they see me," one grandmother responded. Many grandparents specifically said they liked the "little hugs and sticky kisses."

A long-distance grandmother said she liked the phone calls when her grandson said, "Bye, Gamma. I wuv you." Another said she liked their unconditional love, "When they come running with outstretched arms, it's just wonderful."

Several grandparents reported they had the joy of having grandchildren without the responsibility for them. One grandmother said, "I can enjoy them and uphold them in prayer, but I don't have to assume the responsibility to provide for their material, educational, social or spiritual needs." A retired farmer said, "I like having them come to visit and I like to see them go home." One grandmother responded, "I can send them home tired, along with their dirty clothes."

Feelings of generativity are appreciated by more of the grandfathers than the grandmothers. A 73-year-old grandfather responded that he valued "the hope of a new marvelous life of the new generation." A grandmother wrote, "When our daughters left, I felt so alone and the house was so empty. Now life is starting all over. It's like a new beginning." A grandfather responded that he liked "knowing there is a chance for preserving the family name."

What Grandparents Like Least About Grandparenting

When asked, what they liked least about being a grandparent, the most frequent type of response was "nothing is bad." This positive attitude seemed to reflect the general tone of the surveys. The next most frequent answers were related to getting older. (See Table 2). One grandfather explained, "My vim and vigor is gone." One grandmother said, "It gets a little noisy sometimes." A 74-year-old farmer wrote, "You realize that you are now the senior member of your family." Grandfathers seem to feel a great responsibility for their families. Many grandparents didn't like to see their grandchildren leave to go home. They resented not being able to see their grandchildren as often as they wished.

More of the grandmothers than grandfathers were concerned about not interfering. A 67-year-old grandmother wrote, "It's very hard to keep quiet if I think the children are being disciplined unfairly."

Some of the grandmothers were concerned about not spoiling their grandchildren. As one grandmother said, "I just love being a grandparent and I want to give them everything."

Several grandmothers said that grandchildren grow up too fast. A 56-year-old grandmother wrote that it was difficult "seeing those delightful natural creatures lose their innocence and become worldly-wise." Another said, it was difficult "knowing we won't be able to share their lives much longer."

Being taken for granted or being used was another type of response. One grandmother with 10 grandchildren and 2 step-grandchildren said, "We're often 'used' to give money or to babysit." Another wrote that their gifts to the grandchildren were taken for granted.

In general, the responses to the question about the worst aspects of grandparenting have little to do with grandchildren and more with grandparents' own inadequacies.

Advice from Grandmothers

The advice given by many of the grandparents reflected their concern about intergenerational relationships and appreciating the uniqueness of each individual grandchild.

When asked what advice they would give other grandmothers the most frequent reply was to love them. (See Table 3). One grandmother said, "Don't buy their love." Another said, "Love them and have fun with them and then send them home." One grandmother said, "Listen to them, hug them and tell them you love them."

"Don't give advice" was the advice given by many of the grandmothers. One grandmother said, "Keep your mouth shut! Let your families be independent and stand on their own feet." Others offered, "Don't interfere with the parents' authority" or "Be sure to cut the apron strings."

One grandmother suggested grandmothers try to see their grandchildren as much as possible, but "don't expect them to include you in everything they do." Several grandmothers suggested that grandchildren visit one at a time. Small gifts, letters, phone calls, and prayers were suggested ways of keeping in touch with grandchildren.

Grandmothers advised that other grandparents should treasure the precious moments, for as one grandmother wrote, "They grow up so fast." Another said, "Take time to know your grandchild who is different than anyone else in your family. Enjoy his or her company. Besides having fun, his or her self respect will grow as a result of having someone as great and wonderful as a grandparent who likes to be with them." Another said simply, "Hang in there and enjoy."

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Some of the grandmothers advised others to be good models for their grandchildren. "Set a good example and build character into their lives," was one suggestion. Another said, "Don't just become a convenient babysitter, but take advantage of those times to teach and be close." A few advised other grandparents to teach grandchildren about their family heritage.

The advice given by grandmothers indicated that they respected the authority of their children and they wanted most of all to support and encourage the young parents as well as their grandchildren.

The Meaning of Grandparenthood

Research on grandparenting in the 1930s depicted grandparents as meddlers and child spoilers (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981). The data reported in this research certainly do not fit that classification. If grandmothers in the 1980s were writing job descriptions for other grandparents, the tasks would be to love, listen, accept, support, enjoy and not give advice.

For two eminent grandmothers, two important concepts came to the foreground. Carol Kornhaber (personal communication, July, 1986) who has researched grandparenting extensively with her husband, Dr. Arthur Kornhaber, recently became a grandmother for the first time. She said, "I never knew having a grandchild could be this good...I have a real love affair with this little dumpling."

Esther Edgerton (personal communication, September, 1985) whose 50+ years' marriage partner, Harold Edgerton, is a master engineer and inventor, feels grandparents have a responsibility to their grandchildren. She quoted a familiar saying which describes grandparenthood best: "There are two lasting bequests we can leave our grandchildren; one is roots and the other is wings."

It's Never Too Late to Strengthen Family Relations

After hearing from many grandparents, we've learned that they all have concerns and anxieties about their families. Grandparents want the best for both their children and their grandchildren. There are ways that grandparents can help families grow stronger. It takes effort and it also takes time, but it's worth it.

Dr. Nick Stinnett (1979) has researched family strengths and has identified six characteristics of strong families. He says that strong families:

1. Show appreciation for one another,
2. Spend time together,
3. Have good communication patterns,
4. Have commitment,
5. Share a religious orientation, and
6. Deal with crises in a positive manner.

We would like to suggest that even as grandparents grow older, they still can have a major impact on their families and they have a responsibility to support and reinforce their whole family. These are some of the ways that grandparents can help.

Show Appreciation for One Another

Preparing a favorite meal for birthday children lets them know you appreciate and accept them. Encourage them to write thank you notes to others who have helped them--perhaps a teacher who did a special favor. Grandparents have complained that their gifts brought little or no response. But, frequently, those same grandparents have not sent thank you notes for the gifts or kindnesses they have received.

Spend Time Together

Holidays and birthdays are usually family times. Other family rituals are also important, such as baptisms, graduations, weddings, and reunions. Ordinary events can be made special by grandmother using her best dishes and tableware. Having a horseshoe contest, a garden contest, a cookie bake-off, or Trivia Olympics can also pull a family together. Children love traditions of "that's what we always do at Grandpa's house."

Have Good Communication Patterns

Grandparents have excellent opportunities to communicate their unconditional love when talking to grandchildren. Look them directly in their eyes. Touch them--hold their hands, rub their backs, pat them on their shoulders--hug them. Give them your undivided attention. Have grandchildren visit one at a time. This is easier for elders and makes children feel special.

Grandparents who live great distances from their grandchildren can use the telephone to "reach out and touch" their dear ones. Even talking to a baby can bring a sparkle to the child's eyes as well as the grandparents'. Talk with older children about their interests--whether it is frogs, football, or their friends. Tell them you love them.

Write lovenotes; draw a symbol for your signature and send tiny gifts. Write family newsletters; use a copy machine and give headlines for newsworthy events like missing teeth.

Have Commitment

Families need to help one another--stand up for one another. Networking is a popular term which can be applied to families. In a family of 10, there are 45 different relationships--a sizable network. Grandparents need to learn to give and to receive within that network.

Grandparents can develop family histories or albums to show respect for their ancestors. They can share family values, their occupations, their goals and accomplishments. If grandparents share their life stories, children can learn of their roots--their beginnings.

Share A Religious Orientation

Many grandparents feel upset or abandoned when their child marries someone of a different faith. If there can be tolerance of others' faith and understanding that people are different, the results can be rewarding. One technique may be for each family to read daily from an inspirational book agreeable to each family. Then, everyone will read the same thoughts each day...whether they agree or not. This family togetherness, even when apart, can work miracles in binding a family together and healing hurts.

Deal with Crises in a Positive Manner

Even strong families have problems, but they seem to know how to cope. An important concept here is that problems and stresses are usually associated with change and how individuals react and respond.

Grandparents are not always the problem, but often they can provide the solution. Grandparents must learn to look for the positive. Most elders recall the old song, "Accent the Positive, Eliminate the Negative." That should be the theme for grandparents.

Summary

According to the grandparents in this research, love is the most important thing to give a grandchild; it is unconditional and has no strings attached. Grandchildren also need grandparents who will listen to them without criticizing and accept them as they are so they can grow. If they want advice, they will ask for it. Even when grandparents are miles away from their grandchildren, they can find ways to "reach out and touch" them with special meaning. It is up to the grandparents to initiate such action. Grandparents are significant family resources who have a special responsibiiity to enrich the lives of their grandchildren.

Perhaps through more intergenerational contact, grandparents can "patch and mend" some of the "raveled ends" and "tattered seams" of the new extended family. They will realize that by their actions they can sprinkle stardust in the eyes of their grandchildren. Above all, elders need to learn that there are but two lasting bequests we can give our children (and grandchildren); one is roots and the other is wings.

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Table 1

What Grandparents Like Most About Grandparenting

Variable	Grandmothers (n=170)		Grandfathers (n=100)	
	n	%	n	%
Being with them & seeing them grow	74	44	46	46
Being loved, hugged & kissed	46	27	14	14
Joy without responsibility	29	17	12	12
Generativity feelings	6	3	14	14
Seeing your child as a parent	5	3	0	0
No answer	10	6	14	14

Table 2

What Grandparents Like Least About Grandparenting

	Grandmothers		Grandfathers	
	n (n=170)	%	n (n=100)	%
Nothing is bad	35	21	24	24
Getting older	27	16	27	27
Being apart	36	21	14	14
Not interfering	24	14	4	4
Concern for their future	2	2	11	11
Not spoiling them	13	8	0	0
Children grow up too fast	10	6	0	0
Feel being used, not respected	9	5	0	0
Changing diapers	0	0	3	3
No answer	14	8	17	17

Table 3

Advice from Grandmothers

Variable	(n=170)	%
Love them, give love not money tell them you love them	43	25
Listen, be a friend, accept, support	27	16
Don't give advice	23	13
Give time, keep in touch, do things with them	19	11
Treasure precious moments thank God	15	9
Be an example, share values	13	8
Teach them their heritage	5	3
No answer	25	15